# Challenges in Communicating across Cultures

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How often do we encounter situations in which we send one message and our listener receives another? Quite a lot, I guess. It is because pragmatic norms and cultural conventions transfer in cross cultural communication. Transfer of speech act strategies and cultural norms from one culture to another is quite normal when people communicate in second language or in cross-cultural communicative context. This is because people often tend to frame their speech acts according to pragmatic norms of their own language and culture. That is why, understanding of cultural norms and values of other cultures, speech acts of different speech/linguistic communities is vitally important in cross-cultural communication for better understanding between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Otherwise, utterances of people of certain speech community are likely to be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the addressee resulting pragmatic errors. This paper traces some of the complications of communication in cross-cultural communicative context, and also suggests a number of possible ways to deal with them.

Before we can even consider the problems that arise in cross-cultural communication, we need to understand exactly what communication is. Communication is the process of transmitting information, thoughts or feelings, usually via a common system of symbols. Now, if we really think about it, communication is tough in any environment. If we think about our communication failures with our bosses, spouses, kids or parents, we can find a multitude of missed connections. And this is within a mostly shared symbol set. We share the same language, very similar cultural landmarks, social structures, and values, and yet we encounter many complexities to communicate the message. How can we hope to get a clear message across when the symbol sets vary?

Basically, communication is producing and interpreting sign in communicative context. However, communicating in a social context involves mainly two behavioral aspects: the first one is linguistic i.e. framing speech act strategies in a certain linguistic structure, and cultural i.e. observing socio-cultural norms that is about what is appropriate to say in a given communicative context. While the first is known as pragma-linguistic behavior and the second one is known as socio-pragmatic. In this sense, language not only remains as a tool of communication but also a vehicle of culture since it reflects cultural norms of a particular speech community. These pragmatic norms are unwritten rules which language users internalize as a part of the process of attaining communicative competence within their socio-cultural set- up. Highlighting language-cultural relationship, Fung opines , "that the study of language should focus not only on finding linguistic structural regularities, but also regularities of usage that have motives, emotions, desires, attitudes, and values attached to them" (212).

Here, Fung hints at the complications that surface because of language-culture dynamics.

Speaking more plainly, each culture has rules that its members take for granted. Very few people are aware of our own cultural biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. And while some of culture's knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, phobias and anxieties are taught explicitly, most of it is absorbed subconsciously. No matter what we do, we are communicating whether we intend to or not. Communication goes far beyond talking, and nonverbal communication, in its many forms, gives off certain messages to people of different genders and cultures. In a nutshell, one must understand the importance of effective communication in diverse environments.

Now, the question may come: why is the need of effective communication being felt more intensely these days? Effectively communicating with people from different cultures has become increasingly important in a world where physical boundaries are so easily negotiated by the use of technology. We increasingly find that we now work, attend school, communicate professionally, and socially intermingle with people of cultures and environments different than our own. Bridging cultural gaps is an essential step in the process of creating harmonious relationships between people of different backgrounds. Making the attempt to better understand differences in why people live, think, and believe the way that they do enables us to improve as a society, and also gain the respect of those with whom we are attempting to communicate.

And for effective communication in such cross-cultural setting, understanding differences between one's culture and that of the group or individual with whom he /she is trying to communicate is important to better interpretation. This is especially true when language barriers are an issue. The better each side understands some of the cultural differences of the other, the more effective communication will be with one another. But navigating through cultural differences does not always mean that we must overcome language barriers. Even in a society where one language predominately ties people together, understanding cultural diversity is an essential tool in the efficient exchange of the thoughts, ideas, and social interactions which separate people. In other words, overcoming the boundaries of cultural understanding is just as critical as the effective interpretation of language or dialect.

In this way, communication undergoes through immense language-culture relationship. So, every cross-cultural or linguistic setting invites the challenge of linguistic accommodation. For such accommodation, as suggested by John Edwards, the speakers need to modify their persona to make it more acceptable to the addressee so they can "select from their repertoire according to their perceptions of situational constraints and demands" (115). It is what he talks about double self - private and public- with each language speaker.

However linguistic accommodation is not as easy as it might look. It is because different speech communities have different pragmatic norms and cultural conventions about what is right and appropriate at a certain speech context. Absolutely acceptable and appropriate speech behavior in one culture may be completely inappropriate and unacceptable for the people of another culture. For example, accepting compliment in Anglo-American culture is quite normal while in Japanese cultural context it might sound quite arrogant. As a result this may lead communication breakdowns, misunderstandings and formation of false images and stereotypes in cross-cultural encounters. When people bring their own pragmatic norms and cultural conventions, misunderstandings and misinterpretations are more likely to take place. Such transfer of L1 norms into L2 speech context is regarded as pragmatic error. Philip Riley defines pragmatic error as "the result of an interact imposing the rules of one culture on his communicative behavior in a situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate" (204).

Many researches show that international businesses are facing new challenges to their internal communication structures due to major reforms brought about through internationalization, downsizing, mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures. Lack of investment in cross cultural training and language tuition often leads to deficient internal cohesion. The loss of clients/ customers, poor staff retention, lack of competitive edge, internal conflicts/ power struggles, poor working relations, misunderstandings, stress, poor productivity and lack of co-operation are all by-products of poor cross cultural communication. Culture is often at the root of such communication challenges. Exploring historical experiences and the ways in which various cultural groups have related to each other is the key to opening channels for cross-cultural communication. Becoming more aware of cultural differences, as well as exploring cultural similarities, can help us communicate with others more effectively. We can cite some examples here.

In some cultures, looking people in the eye is assumed to indicate honesty and straightforwardness; in others it is seen as challenging and rude. In USA, the cheapest, most effective way to connect with people is to look them into the eye. Most people in Arab cultures share a great deal of eye contact and may regard too little as disrespectful. In English culture, a certain amount of eye contact is required, but too much makes many people uncomfortable. In South Asian and many other cultures, direct eye contact is generally regarded as aggressive and rude.

Just like the case of eye contact, the case of building trust across cultural boundaries is another important thing to consider. Many researches indicate that there is a strong correlation between components of trust and productivity. Cultural differences play a key role in the creation of trust, since trust is built in different ways, and means different things in different cultures. For instance, in the U.S., trust is 'demonstrated performance over time'. There, you can gain the trust of your colleagues by "coming through"

and delivering on time on your commitments. In many other parts of the world, including many Arab, Asian and Latin American countries, building relationships is a pre-requisite for professional interactions. Building trust in these countries often involves lengthy discussions on non-professional topics and shared meals in restaurants. Work-related discussions start only once your counterpart has become comfortable with you as a person.

Likewise, Riley talks about implication of difference in pragmatic norms and cultural conventions across languages/cultures for cross-cultural communication. To Riley, it simply means transferring of L1 and C1 into L2 and C2. To him, it is a natural phenomenon but such transformation results pragmatic errors leading to misunderstanding or communication breakdown. He categorizes such pragmatic errors into two types: pragmatics and sociopragmatics. Defining them, Riley writes, "pragmatic error results from a failure to identify or express meanings correctly where as sociopragmatic error is the result of a failure to identify the situation correctly" (235). To clarify pragmalinguistic failure, Riley beautifully presents an example. An English man offers his desires to help a Japanese lady who is burned with two suitcases, baby etc. but Japanese lady traveler declines that offer and utters, "so sorry, so, sorry, you are very kind" (236). Such answer might offend to Englishman since he fails to identify that the lady was declining only in surface.

Similar to Rilley, Anna Weirzbicka deals with some more examples of transfer from any two languages with reference to particular speech acts like greeting, introducing, complimenting. In her essay, she justifies with ample examples how different languages and cultures have different speech acts. She mainly cites English and Polish languages and shows how cultural values get reflected in speech acts of these respective languages. If we cite an example given by Anna, a Polish host greets the visitor cordially and offers her a seat of honor with these words; "Mrs. Vanessa please sit."

However, unlike in the Polish one, such expression cannot express cordiality or intimacy in English language. In this regard, address form using Mrs. with first name and imperative use is quite natural in Polish socio-pragmatic context. But such imperative use sounds like a command in English so it likely happens to be rude and offensive for English addressee. In English, indirect questioning is preferred for an offer and other speech act strategies like request, suggestion, proposal etc. In this way, Polish culture accepts more use of imperatives in comparison to Japanese and English language. Furthermore in her research, Anna finds so many distinctions in other speech act strategies between these two languages. She finds advice more direct in a statement in Polish English but in Anglo-American English, it is more indirect, and performative verb is hardly used. Highlighting this phenomenon further, Kenneth J. Pakentham writes:

> Learners of a second language, therefore, need to be aware that the rules of polite interactions are not universal. One should be able to identify situations in which the rules of the cultures are different;

they must also be ready to modify their speech to conform to the socio-linguistic conventions of the society they are in. Accomplishing these two tasks is not simple but failure to do so will lead to misunderstandings that may have negative consequences for those who are involved. (123)

In this sense, he shows the challenges of communication in cross-cultural setting. He also mentions what kind of competence the learners of a second language require to possess.

Thus, it seems clear that a linguistic study of culture-specific speech acts and speech styles greatly contribute to see the practical implications in cross-cultural settings. Be humble and friendly most people want to help. It is easy to feel really insecure in an unfamiliar communication environment. That insecurity can translate into misplaced aggression, withdrawal or timidity. If you can get past the shame of feeling like a complete idiot, the world will open at your feet. The problem isn't your ignorance in a particular situation, but your shame and the impulse to hide that ignorance. Just admit that you don't know, have a sense of humor about it, and you will gain much more. Understanding to this domain of language-culture relationship, it not only carries purely academic significance but also immense practical significance and thus, people can adjust easily in cross-cultural encounters.

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